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~ From Rivals to Allies! ~ People Are Talking!   ~ U.S. Flank Is Exposed!
~ Cyber Mastermind Caught ~ Ask.com Seeks Humans! ~ Black Hat and Defcon!
~ Facebook Online Safety ~ $150 Android Tablet!   ~ Rumored BlackPad Due?

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    ~ Microsoft Tablet Coming ~ Amiga: 25 Years Later! ~ The "Magic Trackpad"!

                    -* Facebook Data Torrent Debacle *-
                  -* FBI Access Raises Many Privacy Fears *-
                -* Internet Is Upgraded To Foil Cyber Crooks! *-



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->From the Editor's Keyboard              "Saying it like it is!"
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Joe and I have been "involved" in some capacity with the Atari community
for over 20 years. I'd say that we've both been involved in a variety of
different aspects of "all things Atari". One of the things that both Joe
and I feel very strongly about in all of those activities - and probably
the most profound aspects of our Atari-related activities - are the people
that we've met along the way, whether in person or via some online
experience. We've made a lot of friends (and a few "enemies") over the
years. And over those same years, we've lost a few.

One of those long-time friends is Terry "Teebird" Bird, from Iowa. It is
with great sadness that we're reporting that Teebird lost his wife, Marlene,
after a long illness. Marlene and Terry were married for 50 years. Marlene
passed away in her sleep a couple of weeks ago. All of us here at A-ONE
want to send Terry and his family our most sincerest condolences.

I can't remember when we first met Teebird, but I'm pretty sure that we all
"met" on the Delphi online service many years ago, back when it was among
the three text-based online services. Terry was a frequent user in the
Atari Advantage forum, and I recall being in many chat room chats with Terry
in attendance. Who can remember any of the numerous things that were
discussed in those days?! But, I do remember that the "discussions" were
always fun, even if of "serious" Atari-related topics of the day. And I can
remember that Terry was a supporter of what Joe and I used to write about
when we were both writing for STReport, so many (it seems) years ago. He
didn't always agree with what was written, but fully understood what we were
trying to say. I'm sure that Marlene yelled at him him quite a bit for
being online for long periods of time, and often, like so many of our
wives (or girlfriends at the time) were doing! For putting up with his
online activity (and our enjoyment), we're very grateful to Marlene!

Teebird, our thoughts and prayers are with you!

From the Ames Tribune (Iowa), we're including Marlene's obituary:

                         Marlene Ann Bird

Marlene Ann Bird, 72, of Ames, passed away peacefully in her sleep at home
Saturday, July 17, 2010, following a long illness. No formal service is
planned at this time.

Marlene Bird was born Oct. 30, 1937, in Dows, to William Jay Jr. and Arlene

Ashmore. Her family moved to Story City and then to Ames, where she lived with her mother and maternal grandparents, Adolph and Emelia Iverson, as her father passed away in California in 1949. She married Terry Bird March 9, 1960, at First United Methodist in Ames.

She enjoyed spending time with her granddaughters. She loved attending concerts and was addicted to chocolate.

She is survived by her husband, Terry "Teebird" Bird, of Ames; two daughters, Michelle (Scott Schoba) Sime, of Ames, and Traci (James) Brooks, of Nevada; two granddaughters, Alex Sime and Elizabeth Brooks; mother, Arlene M. Ashmore, of Ames; and two aunts, Viola Bergeson, of Ames, and Ilene Wilhelm, of Lathrop, Calif.

She was preceded in death by her father and both maternal grandparents.

Memorial contributions may be directed to the Susan B. Komen fund or the Bliss Cancer Center.

Condolences may be sent online to www.stevensmemorialchapel.com.

Stevens Memorial Chapel is assisting the family.

Until next time...

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Amiga: 25 Years Later

Black-tie, celebrity-studded gala at the Vivian Beaumont Theater in New York's Lincoln Center. It debuted to rave reviews and great expectations - heck, InfoWorld said it might be the "third milestone" in personal computing after the Apple II and the IBM PC.

The computer was Commodore's Amiga. In an era in which the most common form of microcomputer was an IBM PC-compatible system with a text-only display and a tinny internal speaker, the Amiga had dazzling color graphics and stereo sound. Its Intuition user interface looked like the Mac, but offered an advanced feature known as "multitasking." The machine was a stunner, especially given that it came from a company previously known for rinkydink home computers such as the VIC-20 and Commodore 64.

Over the next nine years, Commodore sold millions of Amigas. People who liked the system really liked it, and its graphical chops were so potent that it was the first PC widely used by TV broadcasters and movie studios. None of which was enough to keep Commodore from declaring bankruptcy and ceasing operations in 1994.

The Amiga was one of the greatest computers ever made - and for my money, it was the greatest cult computer, period (Macintosh users would come to be accused of cultlike tendencies, but when the Mac arrived eighteen months before the Amiga, its whole marketing message was that other computers were cultish - its TV commercials carried the slogan "The computer for the rest

of us" and showed IBM PC owners as zombie slaves.)

Amiga users were indomitable. They were outraged that obviously-inferior IBM PC clones dominated the market. They rejoiced when the computer hit major sales milestones. They petitioned major software companies to support the machine, and wrote angry letters to computer magazines that failed to give it its due. And they kept on using their Amigas for years after Commodore went kaput: The market for Amiga-specific magazines lasted into this century.

Other platforms and tech products would inspire similarly fanatical followings – most notably OS/2 and Linux, both of which developed Amigaesque reputations for technical superiority. But Amiga nuts of the 1980s and early 1990s – like, um, me – remain the ultimate fanboys, even though it hadn't yet occurred to anyone to hurl that word at computer users.

When the Amiga was born, consumers and businesses were still figuring out what computers were and why anybody would want one. But you didn't have to spend much time in the presence of an Amiga to get why it was cool – all you had to do was see and hear what it could do. I bought mine after walking by a computer retailer and spying an Amiga in the window, where it was displaying a full-motion video clip. And to this day, the system is synonymous with the "Boing" demo that its creators used to show off its capabilities even before it went on the market:

If you weren't using computers in the 1980s, trust me: that bouncing ball was spectacular enough to sell Amigas by itself.

Even before it hit the market, the Amiga had an uncommonly checkered history. It began as the project of an independent startup called Amiga Corporation. (It was otherwise best known for the Joyboard, a game controller you stood on.) Amiga cofounder Jay Miner was the man behind the potent graphics capabilities of Atari's 800 and 400 models; Atari advanced the fledgling Amiga company money in return for rights to the chips it was developing.

There's probably some alternate universe in which Amiga ended up being an Atari product. But in September 1984, it was Commodore that acquired Amiga Corporation and the computer it was developing (which was code-named "Lorraine") for an estimated $30 million. Atari CEO and Commodore founder Jack Tramiel – who had acquired Atari from Warner Communications after Commodore had fired in January of 1984 – sued. He also introduced the computer his company had been developing, the Atari ST, a low-rent Amiga rival that was known in the industry as the "Jackintosh."

Commodore was a famously parsimonious outfit, but it splurged on the Amiga's introduction. The highlight of that Lincoln Center product launch was a demo in which pop art legend Andy Warhol used an Amiga to "paint" Blondie's Debbie Harry. The exercise didn't prove much of anything other than that Warhol was able to use the paint program's fill command, but it was heady stuff:

The company also ponied up for TV commercials that looked like outtakes from 2001: A Space Odyssey.

From the start, Commodore struggled mightily to position the Amiga in a way that made sense in the 1980s computer market. An Amiga A1000 with 256KB of RAM and one floppy disk went for $1295. Even after you added $500 for a color monitor, it offered vastly better bang for the buck

than a $2795 black-and-white Macintosh. But as home computers go, the Amiga was pricey. The Atari 520ST, which started shipping a couple of weeks before the Amiga was announced, packed double the RAM and cost $999 - /with/ a color display.

So even though Amiga Corp.'s original idea had been to build the ultimate home computer, Commodore spun the Amiga as a business machine, and talked up an option that let the system run IBM PC compatible software. It turned out to be a tough sell, especially few major business applications were available and most of the major computer retail chains refused to sell it. (The machine ended up being sold mostly by mom-and-pop stores such as The Memory Location, where I bought my Amiga in 1987.)

Why wouldn't big computer retailers carry an impressive computer like the Amiga? Commodore itself was part of the problem. It was famous for selling undistinguished home computers at bargain-basement prices at stores such as Toys "R" Us. The very idea of it launching a computer as slick and powerful as the Amiga was jarring - it was as if Yugo had bought out DeLorean. And without Jack Tramiel, Commodore lacked the ambition, heart, guerrilla tactics, and raw nervous energy that had made the Commodore 64 the best-selling computer of its time.

In July of 1985, computer magazines had talked about the Amiga overtaking the Mac; within a few months, they were questioning whether Commodore had a future. Like Mac owners of the mid-1990s, Amiga users had to deal with constant predictions of the imminent demise of their platform. Except in the case of Commodore, the naysayers turned out to be right.

Benj Edwards' Amiga teardown at PCWorld is a great guided tour of the system's innards, which, like the original Mac, featured the signatures of the design team engraved on the inside of the case.)

Even the Amiga's defects were part of its lore. The multitasking operating system lacked memory protection, so errant apps could crash the whole machine in the spectacular meltdown known as a Guru Meditation - one of the greatest error messages of all time.

Thinking back, I'm struck by the excellence and innovation shown by third-party Amiga products. Electronic Arts shipped a powerful image editor called Deluxe Paint that would make my short list of the greatest applications of all time. NewTek's TV-studio-in-a-box, the Video Toaster, was a famous piece of vaporware for years, but when it finally arrived it changed the way television was produced. Using an app like Sculpt 3D, you could do raytraced 3D animation on the Amiga - as long as you didn't mind waiting a few hours for each fame to render. And Games, such as the multimedia epics from a company called Cinemaware, were often eye-popping. Basically, the companies that built Amiga apps and add-ons seemed to understand the machine's potential far better than Commodore's executives ever did.

So did Amiga users, although they tended to be longer on missionary zeal than social graces. When computer magazines gave the computer short shrift, they'd receive angry missives from Amigoids that left editors wanting to avoid saying anything that might attract the attention of the Amiga community, period. (I still remember an editor I once worked for receiving a piece of hate mail from an OS/2 user, shaking his head, and saying "At least they're not as bad as the Amiga people.")

Amiga owners tended to form a complex attitude towards the machine, its place in the computer world, and what their ownership of an Amiga said

about them. It was one part superiority complex (owning an Amiga showed you were a person of discerning taste!) and one part inferiority complex (being a Commodore customer was enough to leave anyone feeling a little bedraggled).

In the end, their deep faith in the Amiga was both touching and profoundly unrealistic. Even in the early 1990s, Amiga magazines - there were a gazillion of them, and I read them all - were full of letters from people who thought the system might be on the cusp of explosive popularity. I also belonged to two Amiga user groups, and have vivid memories of attending one meeting that was largely focused on the urgency of convincing Lotus to release an Amiga edition of 1-2-3. Once that happened, wouldn't businesses everywhere jump on the bandwagon?

Like I said, complex.

Amiga 500 (which was much cheaper) and Amiga 2000. They were eventually succeeded by models such as the 3000, 4000, and 600; Commodore also introduced the CD32, a CD-ROM-equipped game console based on Amiga technology.

Except for the specialized market of video professionals, the company pretty much gave up on the notion that the Amiga was a business machine - here's a later TV commercial that sort of positions the 500 as a super-powerful Commodore 64:

It really wasn't until the mid-1990s that Windows PCs and Macs began to catch up with the multimedia panache that the Amiga had displayed back in the Reagan administration. And by then, Commodore was terminally ill. In May of 1994, it went bankrupt and stopped making Amigas.

Which didn't mark the end of the Amiga: Its assets were bought by a German company called Escom, which hatched grandiose plans for the platform. It failed to realize them, and went bankrupt in 1996.

In 1997, direct-market PC giant Gateway acquired Amiga, hatched a different set of grandiose plans, failed to realize them, and gave up on its acquisition in 1999.

That was eleven years ago, and the Amiga still isn't dead. But if you can parse its recent history, you're paying better attention than I have. All I know is that it involves multiple companies promising Amiga hardware and software that never amounts to anything - and that a company called A-Eon intends to release a new Amiga called the AmigaOne later this year.

Bottom line: The Amiga's quarter-century of existence includes nine bumpy years under Commodore ownership, and sixteen years of limbo under too many owners to count. The fact that people continue to think of it as a platform with a future is amazing. But I wouldn't wish its post-Commodore history on the junkiest computer in the world, let alone one that was once so full of potential. (And some of its classic games may be coming to the iPhone.)

My take: Maybe it's okay that the platform's period of viability was relatively short, and that it never became a blockbuster. I must confess that I gave up on my Amiga in 1991 and replaced it with a mundane PC clone. But we Amiga owners had a good time while it lasted - and the memories make me smile even now.

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                    PEOPLE ARE TALKING
                   compiled by Joe Mirando
                    joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho, friends and neighbors. Well, another week has come and gone. It's
been HOT here. I'm not talking about Death Valley hot, no, that's not what
we get here in the northeast. But it's been hotter than usual even for
late July. The one thing we have here that they don't in Death Valley is
humidity. It's been very humid, muggy, whatever you want to call it.

For quite a while (a couple of weeks), it was quite hot (90's) and we got
no precipitation at all. Now, since we pay for the water we use, I haven't
been watering the lawn. It's been hot enough that the ground dried out and
the grass all turned brown and died away. Then Mother Nature did her thing
and let it rain. Some of the grass came back quickly, but there are still
big brown patches everywhere. If they were more symmetrical, I'd tell
people that they were crop circles. [grin]

The upshot is that, while some of lawn is thick and green and overgrown,
some of it is still just brown and sickly looking. We'll see if I continue
to play the fiscally responsible one and not water the lawn. I don't know.
I've never been one to want to put a lot of work into the lawn (ask
Dana)... it's just grass, after all, but I must admit that there's
something about a well-kept, green, thick lawn that looks nice. Know what
I mean?

Well, things that grow are Dana's area. He genuinely enjoys that stuff. I
usually do it because it has to be done and leave it at that. So I'll
leave it at that and talk about something else.

A couple of something else's, actually.

First of all, I've got some very sad news. Some of you probably remember
Terry Bird from chatrooms years ago. He was one of my favorite people to
chat with because he's intelligent, witty and an all-around good guy. He's
retired now, but he was a police captain in Iowa. Well, he sent me an
email last week that broke my heart.

Marlene, his wife of 50 years, passed away after a long illness. My heart
goes out to Terry and his daughters, and it's times like this that I wish
all good friends could be closer physically. In this case, so that I could
take my grieving buddy a pizza from one of the best pizza places on the
planet. No, a pizza will not salve an aching soul, but the camaraderie can
help, at least a little.

There simply are no words at a time like this to express something so
painful, but I hope that we all stop for just a moment and say a quick
prayer (if you're so inclined) or even just think good warm thoughts for a
moment for our friend and an upstanding member of the Atari community.

I also want to mention a couple of "Power Without the Price" computers.
There is, of course, The One Laptop Per Child XO computer. It's brightly

colored, feature-packed and fairly sturdy (despite some issues with keyboard failures), and I'll have a review of it in a couple of weeks right here in A-ONE.

The XO (or OLPC, as it's commonly known), is designed for younger kids, as a low-cost way to introduce them to computing. The idea is that governments will purchase these machines and distribute them to kids in schools so that they can learn the principles of computing and collaboration. The 'target price' for these machines is $100 US. They missed the mark, and if I remember correctly, they're currently selling them for $175. There's at least one other machine on the OLPC drawing board, and the idea is catching on. I'm of two minds about the use of government funds for computers for school kids, but I look at it as an experiment. I mean, with the worldwide problems of war and famine and the lack of clean water to drink, should governments really be spending money on computers for school kids who might not have enough to eat or drink or have to worry about malaria or any number of curable diseases?

On the other hand, might not the discipline of structured thinking and familiarity with technology help to "raise" them to a higher, more efficient, more "marketable" position?

And that's not even considering the usefulness of the computers themselves. The XO comes with built-in WiFi and a rather interesting networking philosophy that aids in collaboration. I'll cover all of that as best I can in the review. But back to the 'usefulness'. Since its WiFi enabled, all that's required is a 'hotspot' and someone with an XO can surf the net to get news, weather, hell, even Tweet and blog. The problem, of course, will be finding a hotspot in the Kalahari.

More on the OLPC XO-1 in a couple of weeks.

There's other news on the "Power Without the Price" front too. Last week it was announced that India (the Indian Institute of Technology and the Indian Institute of Science) have a design on the drawing board for a touch tablet aimed at students for the unbelievable price of $35! Imagine that! A touch tablet for 35 bucks! While that's still a large sum of money for many Indians, it's about one percent of what I paid for my first laptop! Now THAT is power without the price! Even if it's under-powered by today's standards, it'll beat the wee wee out of products like Amazon's Kindle and other 'e-readers' out there for reading electronic books, if nothing else.

No one has released details about the specifications of the thing yet, but rumors are that it'll have two gigabytes of RAM, a webcam and will run Linux as its operating system.

This tablet will be aimed at students also, but more likely high school and college students. Running Linux instead of something like a Microsoft operating system cuts the cost way down. Imagine a $35 tablet computer decked out with ANY version of Windows let alone Win7. Even buying a copy on eBay would probably put you over the cost of the PC itself!

It remains to be seen if this machine will actually debut, and if it'll reach its target price, but regardless, it shows that there are always alternatives, and always options.

Well, that's it for this time around. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Rebooted Starcraft Aims To Draw New Gamers!
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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News   - The Latest Gaming News!
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                    Rebooted Starcraft Aims To Draw New Gamers

Twelve years after Starcraft, one of the highest grossing videogames in
history, its makers released a sequel Tuesday in hopes of drawing new fans
to its intergalactic adventure.

Much-awaited "Starcaft II: Wings of Liberty" picks up where the 1998 game
ended, set in the 26th century in a distant part of the Milky Way, where
the Terrans, human exiles from Earth, are at war with the Zerg and the
Protoss.

Developed by US studio Blizzard, makers of the world's most popular online
videogame "World of Warcraft", the new chapter in the adventures of Terran
rebel leader Jim Raynor is to be followed by two extensions.

Players are given 30-odd missions in the game, positioning units to
overcome enemy armies through troop transport, construction and
engineering or armoured attack.

"By keeping the three races from the first Starcraft we enable players
to find their bearings and continue the adventure where they left off,"
lead designer Dustin Browder told AFP.

"But we have added new units to force them to think up new tactics."

And to draw in new players, Blizzard has adopted a system allowing fans
to progress stage by stage.

"They can play alone on the main campaign then take on challenges before
going on to play against other gamers on the Internet," Browder said.
"We have set up a mechanism allowing players of similar level to play
against each other online so the game never loses interest."

The first episode was a standard bearer for electronic games,

particularly in South Korea where championships are held. Half of the
first episode's 10 million sales were in South Korea.

Analyst Mike Hiuckey of Janco Partners expects seven million copies of
Starcraft II to be sold by the end of the year.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Software Rivals Turning to Allies To Battle Cyber Crime

As a major computer security conference kicked off here Wednesday, Microsoft
announced that teamwork between technology rivals is paying off in the
perpetual arms race with hackers.

"As we look at the industry, we see this continued need for shared
responsibility," said Microsoft Trustworthy Computing Group director
Dave Forstrom. "We must work together."

Microsoft chose a Black Hat computer security conference in Las Vegas as
the stage to unveil findings that initiatives it launched here two years
earlier were getting software makers, users and defenders to become allies.

As of June, there were 65 companies worldwide taking part in the
Microsoft Active Protections Program (MAPP) for early access to the
technology giant's security updates.

"MAPP shifted the competitive advantage from attackers to defenders,"
Forstrom said.

"Before MAPP, we released vulnerability patches on Tuesday and immediately
there was a race with the hackers trying to reverse-engineer and attack,
and IT guys working to put in patches."

Releasing software fixes to everyone at the same time gave hackers an
"attack window" that remained open until computer users applied upgrades
or patches.

The MAPP program let "good guys" got a head start building or installing
patches or fixes before cyber criminals could craft attacks targeting
the vulnerabilities.

Microsoft's other initiatives involved indexing how dangerous bugs are
so businesses can prioritize responses and checking for vulnerabilities
in third-party software that runs on the technology titan's platforms.

Adobe recently signed on to the Microsoft initiatives and is using the
network as a conduit for details about updates or patches for its suite
of software that includes Flash and Reader.

"Vendors had to wait for the day we published an update, then begin a foot race with bad guys who try to leverage attacks," said Brad Arkin, senior director for product security and privacy at Adobe.

"It is all about narrowing the window of vulnerability. The success of the MAPP program has demonstrated to us it is worth it."

He added that since opening up to "partners on the front line" the time it takes his team at Adobe to learn about new software attacks has plummeted from weeks to seconds.

"Customers aren't concerned about competitive differences," Forstrom said. "They want to know how software vendors out there are working together and have their backs."

Forstrom equated collaborative efforts of computer software and security rivals to US "Neighborhood Watch" programs in which neighbors form tightly knit groups united against crime in their communities.

"Cops were not able to keep up with crime so they involved citizens with law enforcement," Forstrom said. "We see the same thing in the online landscape. These criminals are invading our homes, our businesses and our privacy."

Last week, Microsoft proposed a standard that would call on those who discover software bugs to give program creators chances to fix the flaws before telling the rest of the world.

Responsibly sharing details about software weaknesses is bound to be a hot topic here this week as Black Hat segues into a notorious DefCon gathering of hackers whose status comes from exposing ways past computer defenses.

"Some of these debates may never be resolved," Forstrom said. "There should be a refocusing on the fact that criminals really are at the heart of this and are the one common enemy we share."

Software wizards in DefCon contend they routinely take their discoveries to companies involved.

US Flank Exposed on Cyber War Front

Former US spy master and retired general Michael Hayden warned on Thursday that the country's "cyber flank" was exposed and it was losing clout to influence rules of war on the Internet.

"Our flank is totally exposed," Hayden said at the "Black Hat" computer security gathering in Las Vegas, comparing the nation's tactical position on the Internet to a battle of land troops.

"If tomorrow they show up on that flank they are going to roll down."

Black Hat founder Jeff Moss equated the situation to the nuclear faceoff between superpowers during the Cold War years of his childhood.

"You could wake up any day and get nuked, but you got up every day and went on with your life anyway," Moss said.

Hayden dodged giving his assessment of the threat level on the Internet, saying people were abusing the term "cyber war" by applying it to anything unpleasant that happens on the Internet.

The former head of both the CIA and the top secret National Security Agency dismissed the idea of labeling online espionage as acts of war since it is standard practice between nations.

"If you understand the meaning of war to include intelligence gathering, sure there is cyber war," Hayden said. "We don't call sucking out information an attack. That's exploitation. States do that all the time."

The retired general said he was in "absolute awe and wonderment" at the Chinese cyber espionage campaign but that they were certainly not the only nation doing it and the United States is "actually very good at this."

There isn't a country on the planet that has promised to refrain from cyber spying, according to Hayden.

"Quit whining, act like a man and defend yourself," he concluded, quoting advice his father gave him when he was a boy.

He faulted an Internet built on the premise of quickly and freely sharing information for creating an open landscape that gives attackers an edge over defenders.

"You guys make the cyber world look like the north German plain and then you bitch and moan because you get invaded," he told a Black Hat audience. "We all get treated like Poland on the Web."

Hayden called for the creation of Internet versions of rivers, mountains, and other geographic features that soldiers use for defensive positions in real world battles.

"Cyber is a domain like land, sea, air, and space," Hayden said. "The difference is that God made four and you made the last one. God did a better job."

He welcomed recent signs that US officials are open to establishing international rules of engagement on the Internet, saying the move is far overdue.

"We'd better move fast; our voice in this is weaker as time goes by," Hayden said.

The United States should have taken the lead in setting cyber codes of conduct a decade or more ago, when it was king of much of the technology involved and countries weren't walling off territories on the Web, he added.

"Now that you see this gradual balkanization, the US influence weakens," Hayden said.

Sensitive targets such as power grids and financial systems, while legitimate targets in times of war, could be deemed off-limits to routine espionage to avoid unintended catastrophe.

Countries could be made accountable for any cyber attacks from within

their borders and aid could be given to nations that genuinely want to curb online espionage but lack resources.

He contended that state-sponsored spying causes so much "turbulence" on the Internet that calming the behavior with international rules of behavior would make it easier to spot "truly malevolent terrorist" attacks.

Internet Warriors Hone Skills at Black Hat - DefCon

Internet warriors are gathering this week to explore chinks in the armors of computers, bank teller machines, mobile phones, power grids, and other "smart" devices intrinsic to modern life.

Black Hat USA kicks off in Las Vegas on Wednesday with briefings at which security professionals from technology firms including Microsoft and Cisco will dissect ways to safeguard or foil computers.

Black Hat segues on Friday into DefCon, an infamous annual assembly of hackers that pride themselves on finding ways around computer defenses.

Attendance at the events overlaps, with security professionals and software rogues sharing insights in an irreverent setting that has become a recruiting ground for US law enforcement agencies.

"Black Hat is a place where security researchers go to show off their work and get peer feedback," said Jeff Moss, who founded and runs both gatherings.

"DefCon is the fun stuff they don't have time to do in their day jobs."

The packed roster of topics at Black Hat will include hacks that make automated teller machines spew cash and the vulnerability of nuclear power plants, chemical factories and other online systems.

Hot trends are expected to include vulnerabilities of smartphones along with how hackers, and the crime fighters trying to catch them, are adapting to programs hosted as services in the Internet "cloud."

"There is a continuing focus on ways the current Web works and how to attack that," said Moss, whose hacker name is Dark Tangent. "Smartphones are a big target."

Attacks aimed at Internet browsers continue to grow as more aspects of people's lives go online.

Hackers are hiding malicious viruses in mini-applications, videos and other files to take advantage of the trust with which people share and download digital content.

Tracks focused on cyber war, government technology policy, and organized crime have been added this year.

A "Chinese Cyber-army" presentation by the chief technology officer of Taiwan-based Armorize Technologies was yanked by the company, reportedly due to concerns it would anger Chinese officials.

"That is a shame, because they had real numbers and these guys were going to really frame the size of the problem," Moss said of the canceled presentation of data about China-backed hacking during the past decade.

"This is the environment we are all living in. We'd better have our eyes open."

DefCon is "an order of magnitude cheaper" than Black Hat and notoriously attracts the kinds of basement-dwelling computer savants portrayed as quirky geeks in Hollywood films.

DefCon's array of activities includes a lock picking village and a "capture the flag" contest to see who can break into a computer network and fend off rivals.

A "social engineering" contest will challenge contestants to prove how adept they are at telephoning people at companies and talking them into revealing information that hackers could use to crack networks.

"There is a lot of voodoo and mysticism around social engineering," Moss said. "We are trying to clarify what works and what doesn't."

DefCon talks this year target the gamut of computerized gadgets and some unusual sessions, such one about how to "hack your own body."

"We like DefCon because it is a great forum for the right people," said lock-busting expert Marc Tobias, who will show how top locks from a set of well-known companies can be popped in seconds.

"Fingerprint locks, electromagnetic locks... all these guys are winning all kinds of awards and nobody wants to admit that Egyptian locks from four hundred years ago are more secure. Clever doesn't mean secure."

Lock picking has natural appeal in the world of hackers, since getting hold of a computer can make it easier to break into the machine.

Even DefCon badges keep with the theme, bearing computer circuitry that can be turned into radios, light message boards or other gadgets by hackers clever enough to bend the hardware to their wills.

So many national security officials speak or recruit at DefCon that the traditional game of "Spot the Fed" has been modified so that only hackers spotting a cop with a badge and actual arrest authority can win a T-shirt.

Black Hat attendance is up 35 percent this year and DefCon, which doesn't register people in advance, is expected to reflect a similar rise.

Facebook Launches Web Page Devoted to Online Safety

Facebook on Monday launched a Web page devoted to staying safe on the Internet.

The "Safety Page" will highlight news and initiatives focused on ways people can keep data secure at the world's leading online social-networking community, Joe Sullivan of Facebook said in a blog

post.

The new page was intended to augment a virtual Safety Center that Facebook introduced in April and was based on a "security page" that boasted more than 2.2 million "fans" as of Monday.

"Online safety is a shared responsibility," Sullivan said. "We'll continue to think of innovative ways to promote safety on our service and elsewhere on the Web."

The number of people using Facebook topped the 500 million mark last week, meaning one in every 14 people on the planet has now signed up to the social network.

The launch of the Safety Page came in the wake of demands by privacy activists that Facebook give users of the booming social network more control over the use of their personal data.

A coalition of privacy groups, in an open letter to Facebook co-founder and chief executive Mark Zuckerberg last month, welcomed the social network's recent overhaul of its privacy controls but said additional steps were needed.

The Facebook Data Torrent Debacle

Security concerns over Facebook have been raised yet again after a security consultant collected the names and profile URLs for 171 million Facebook accounts from publicly available information. The consultant, Ron Bowes, then uploaded the data as a torrent file allowing anyone with a computer connection to download the data.

Simon Davies a representative of the U.K.-based privacy watchdog Privacy International accused Facebook of negligence over the data mining technique, according to the BBC. Facebook, however, told the British news service that Bowes actions haven't exposed anything new since all the information Bowes collected was already public.

So what are the security risks? Should you be concerned? Let's take a look.

What data was collected?

Ron Bowes, a security consultant and blogger at Skull Security, used a piece of computer script to scan Facebook profiles listed in Facebook's public profile directory. Using the script Bowes collected the names and profile URLs for every publicly searchable Facebook profile. All together, Bowes said he was able to collect names and Web addresses for 171 million Facebook users. That's a little more than a third Facebook's 500 million users.

What did he do with the data?

Bowes compiled this list of text into a file and made it available online as a downloadable torrent.

How many people have downloaded the torrent?

The Pirate Bay lists 2923 seeds and 9473 leechers for the torrent file at the time of this writing. Seeds are people who have downloaded the entire file and are uploading to others. Leechers are actively downloading the file.

Is this a big deal?

That depends on who you ask. Facebook points out that some of the data Bowes collected was already available through search engines like Google and Bing. The entire data set is also available to any user signed into Facebook. So the data was already publicly available, and nobody's private Facebook data has been compromised. Nevertheless, this is the first time that 171 million Facebook profile names have been collected into one set of files that can be easily analyzed and searched by anyone.

What could a malicious hacker use the data for?

As Bowes pointed out in a blog post, someone could use this data as a starting point to find other publicly available user data on Facebook. After all, you have to wonder how many of these 171 million Facebook users have publicly exposed e-mail addresses, phone numbers and other information on their profiles?

It has been proven time and again that the more a bad guy knows about you the greater your security risk is. Collecting personal data allowed a French hacker to steal confidential corporate documents at Twitter. Researchers were alarmed when Netflix wanted to release anonymous user data including age, gender and ZIP code for the Netflix Prize 2. Security researchers said the data dump by Netflix was irresponsible since it is possible to narrow down a person's identity just by knowing their age and ZIP code. The contest was eventually canceled. One Carnegie-Mellon study also found a flaw in the social security numbering system that could allow a sophisticated hacker using data mining techniques to uncover up to 47 social security numbers a minute.

How do I know if my name was caught in the data dump?

From your Facebook profile dashboard click on 'Account' in the upper right hand side of your dashboard. Select 'Privacy Settings,' and then on the next page under 'Basic Directory Information' click on 'View Settings.' You should see a page similar to the image above. If the first listing called "Search for me on Facebook" is set to "Everyone." Then chances are, your name and profile URL are in the torrent file. (*Click image to zoom*)

You should also check to see if external search engines like Google and Bing are indexing your profile. To do this go back to your main privacy settings page, and at the bottom click on the "Edit Settings" button next to "Public Search." On the next page, if the "Enable public search" check box is ticked then search engines are indexing your profile. To stop this just uncheck the box and then click on "Back to Applications."

My name is not in the public directory should I be concerned?

If you were not in the public directory Bowes says your name is not in the torrent file. However, you could be exposed to similar data mining techniques in the future. Bowes says that if any of your Facebook connections have made their friends lists public then your profile could easily be found through data mining your friends' profiles.

What can I do to keep my information private?

The biggest concern isn't so much about your name and profile URL being exposed. The greater concern, for you anyway, is the publicly available information contained on your profile page.

To protect yourself, you may want to reconsider your current privacy settings. To do that visit your Facebook profile's Basic Directory Information page by following the steps listed above.

On the top right of the page you should see a button that says "Preview My Profile." Clicking that button will show you all the information you make public on Facebook. Data you may want to consider hiding includes your hometown, birth date, age, phone number, current city and e-mail address.

So what do you say? Is Bowes' data dump making your rethink your Facebook profile settings or are you not concerned?

Internet Upgraded To Foil Cyber Crooks

The Internet has undergone a "critical" upgrade that promises to stop cyber criminals from using fake websites that dupe people into downloading viruses or revealing personal data.

The agency in charge of managing Internet addresses teamed with online security services firm VeriSign and the US Department of Commerce to give websites encrypted identification to prove they are legitimate.

"This is, by any measure, an historic development," ICANN chief executive Rod Beckstrom said while breaking the news at a premier Black Hat computer security conference in Las Vegas on Wednesday.

"This security upgrade matters to everyone who uses a computer, and that means most of us."

The Domain Name System Security Extensions, referred to as DNSSEC, basically adds a secret, identifying code to each website address.

The domain name system is where the world's Internet addresses are stored and plays a key role in enabling computers around the world to speak with one another online.

Applications commonly used on the Internet can be tailored to essentially check the ID of a website to make certain it is what it claims to be, according to Dan Kaminsky, a hacker turned computer security specialist.

For example, web browser software such as Google or Bing could be adapted to tell whether a bank log-in page is authentic.

"When a user receives an email from a bank they should know it came from a bank," Kaminsky said. "This is something we needed as engineers to make this a reality."

FBI Access to E-mail and Web Records Raises Fears

Invasion of privacy in the Internet age. Expanding the reach of law enforcement to snoop on e-mail traffic or on Web surfing. Those are among the criticisms being aimed at the FBI as it tries to update a key surveillance law.

With its proposed amendment, is the Obama administration merely clarifying a statute or expanding it? Only time and a suddenly on guard Congress will tell.

Federal law requires communications providers to produce records in counterintelligence investigations to the FBI, which doesn't need a judge's approval and court order to get them.

They can be obtained merely with the signature of a special agent in charge of any FBI field office and there is no need even for a suspicion of wrongdoing, merely that the records would be relevant in a counterintelligence or counterterrorism investigation. The person whose records the government wants doesn't even need to be a suspect.

The bureau's use of these so-called national security letters to gather information has a checkered history.

The bureau engaged in widespread and serious misuse of its authority to issue the letters, illegally collecting data from Americans and foreigners, the Justice Department's inspector general concluded in 2007. The bureau issued 192,499 national security letter requests from 2003 to 2006.

Weathering that controversy, the FBI has continued its reliance on the letters to gather information from telephone companies, banks, credit bureaus and other businesses with personal records about their customers or subscribers - and Internet service providers.

That last source is the focus of the Justice Department's push to get Congress to modify the law.

The law already requires Internet service providers to produce the records, said Dean Boyd, a spokesman for the Justice Department's national security division. But he said as written it also causes confusion and the potential for unnecessary litigation as some Internet companies have argued they are not always obligated to comply with the FBI requests.

A key Democrat on Capitol Hill, Senate Judiciary Committee chairman Patrick Leahy of Vermont, wants a timeout.

The administration's proposal to change the Electronic Communications Privacy Act "raises serious privacy and civil liberties concerns," Leahy said Thursday in a statement.

"While the government should have the tools that it needs to keep us safe, American citizens should also have protections against improper intrusions into their private electronic communications and online transactions," said Leahy, who plans hearings in the fall on this and other issues involving the law.

Critics are lined up in opposition to what the Obama administration wants to do.

"The FBI is playing a shell game," says Al Gidari, whose clients have

included major online companies, wireless service providers and their industry association.

"This is a huge expansion" of the FBI's authority "and burying it this way in the intelligence authorization bill is really intended to bury it from scrutiny," Gidari added.

Boyd, the Justice spokesman, said the changes being proposed will not allow the government to obtain or collect new categories of information; rather it simply seeks to clarify what Congress intended when the statute was amended in 1993, he argued.

Critics, however, point to a 2008 opinion by the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel which found that the FBI's reach with national security letters extends only as far as getting a person's name, address, the period in which they were a customer and the numbers dialed on a telephone or to that phone.

The problem the FBI has been having is that some providers, relying on the 2008 Justice opinion - issued during the Bush administration - have refused to turn over Internet records such as information about who a person e-mails and who has e-mailed them and information about a person's Web surfing history.

To deal with the issue, there's no need to change the law since the FBI has the authority to obtain the same information with a court order issued under a broad section of the Patriot Act, said Gregory Nojeim, director of the Project on Freedom, Security and Technology at the Center for Democracy and Technology, a nonprofit Internet privacy group.

The critics say the proposed change would allow the FBI to remove federal judges and courts from scrutiny of its requests for sensitive information.

"The implications of the proposal are that no court is deciding whether even that low standard of 'relevance' is met," said Nojeim. "The FBI uses national security letters to find not just who the target of an investigation e-mailed, but also who those people e-mailed and who e-mailed them."

Cyber Mastermind Arrested, Questioned in Slovenia

A cyber mastermind from Slovenia who is suspected of creating a malicious software code that infected 12 million computers worldwide and orchestrating other huge cyberscams has been arrested and questioned, police said Wednesday.

Leon Keder, a spokesman for the Slovenian police, did not identify the suspect. Keder told The Associated Press the man was released after police made sure that he could not tamper with evidence or leave Slovenia, but offered no details pending an investigation.

The FBI told The AP in Washington that a 23-year old Slovene known as Iserdo was picked up in Maribor in northwestern Slovenia 10 days ago, after lengthy investigation by Slovenian police, FBI and Spanish authorities.

His arrest comes about five months after Spanish police broke up the massive

cyberscam, arresting three of the alleged ringleaders who operated the Mariposa botnet, which stole credit cards and online banking credentials. The botnet - a network of infected computers - appeared in December 2008 and infected hundreds of companies and at least 40 major banks.

Botnets are networks of PCs that have been infected by a virus, remotely hijacked from their owners, often without their owners' knowledge, and put into the control of criminals.

"In the last two years, the software used to create the Mariposa botnet was sold to hundreds of other criminals, making it one of the most notorious in the world," said FBI Director Robert Mueller in a statement. "These cyber intrusions, thefts, and frauds undermine the integrity of the Internet and the businesses that rely on it; they also threaten the privacy and pocketbooks of all who use the Internet."

The Mariposa botnet, which has been dismantled, was easily one of the world's biggest. It spread to more than 190 countries, according to the researchers who helped take it down after examining it in the spring of 2009.

Jeffrey Troy, the FBI's deputy assistant director for the cyber division, said Iserdo's arrest was a major break in the investigation.

On Wednesday, the FBI also identified, for the first time, the three individuals arrested in connection with the case in Spain: Florencio Carro Ruiz, known as "Netkairo;" Jonathan Pazos Rivera, known as "Jonyloleante;" and Juan Jose Bellido Rios, known as "Ostiator.

They are being prosecuted for computer crimes. Officials said the Mariposa botnet from Spain was the largest and most notorious.

In Ljubljana, Keder said "other suspects" were detained and interrogated along with the chief suspect, but offered no further details until a news conference planned for Friday.

Slovenian media have linked three former students of the Maribor Faculty of Computing and IT to the case, reporting that they were recently detained and interrogated by police and FBI officials, who confiscated their computer equipment.

The FBI's Troy said more arrests are expected and are likely to extend beyond Spain and Slovenia, targeting additional operators who allegedly bought the malware from Iserdo.

Mariposa is the Spanish word for "butterfly." Iserdo, read backwards, means "salvation" in Slovenian.

RIM s Rumored 'BlackPad' Tablet Due in November?

Rumors of a BlackBerry tablet are heating up by the day, with Bloomberg now claiming that the BlackPad - yes, the BlackPad - will arrive in November, complete with an iPad-size screen and the ability to connect to the Internet via either Wi-Fi or your Bluetooth-connected BlackBerry.

Citing a pair of anonymous sources "familiar with the company s plans," Bloomberg says the tablet will indeed be called the BlackPad (which would

presumably explain BlackBerry-maker RIM s recent acquisition of "BlackPad.com") and would boast a display that s "roughly" the same size as the iPad s 9.7-inch screen.

Rather than having its own, embedded 3G radio, the BlackPad would rely on Wi-Fi or Bluetooth tethering to your BlackBerry to connect to the Internet, Bloomberg s tipsters claim - a nifty trick. I sure wish I could tether the iPad to my iPhone for 3G data.

The article doesn t go into detail about what kind of processor would power the rumored BlackPad, or whether it would run on the revamped BlackBerry OS 6 (which seems likely). It did note, however, that the BlackPad s pricing would be "in line" with that of the iPad, which starts at $499 for the 16GB Wi-Fi-only version.

Several details of the Bloomberg story are at odds with what we heard from one wireless analyst earlier this month, who predicted that the BlackBerry tablet would come with built-in Wi-Fi and a smaller, 7-inch display.

Rodman & Renshaw analyst Ashok Kumar (who, it must be said, has thrown some wild pitches lately when it comes to tech predictions) also thinks the BlackBerry slate will arrive with a 1GHz processor and dual cameras, including a front-facing lens for video chat.

The Bloomberg story caps months of rumors and speculation about a BlackBerry tablet, which stretch back as early as April and gained traction in June after the Wall Street Journal threw its own anonymously sourced log on
the fire.

The latest rumors also come just days before BlackBerry s planned press event next week. Expected among the surprises: a new touchscreen QWERTY slider powered by the revamped, touch-friendly BlackBerry OS 6.

I admit to being pretty skeptical about the BlackBerry tablet rumors in the early months, but based on the steady buzz, it s starting to look like the BlackPad - or whatever it ends up being called - could indeed be for real, although RIM still refuses to confirm or deny its existance. If the tablet is real, though, the ability to tether with a BlackBerry for 3G data would be a major selling point.

7-Inch, $150 Android Tablet Set To Go on Sale

Rather not spend $500 on an iPad or $550 on Dell s 5-inch Android tablet? Is Archos s $200 Android slate still a tad too rich for your blood? Then try this on for size: a 7-inch, $150 Android tablet, coming soon to a K-Mart near you.

Set to go on sale this week, according to Kmart circulars spotted by Engadget, Augen s GenTouch78 makes for one of the cheapest full-on tablet devices I ve seen yet (well, except maybe for this one, and according to the manufacturer s spec sheet, it s got some pretty solid features to go along with the bargain price tag.

Running on version 2.1 of the Android OS (slightly behind Android 2.2, which is starting to roll out on the latest Android smartphones), the

GenTouch sports a 7-inch, 800-by-480 TFT touch display, plus an 800MHz processoor under the hood, 256MB of RAM, 2GB of internal storage, an SD/MMC memory card slot (good for expanding the tablet s storage capacity by another 16GB), and - naturally - Wi-Fi support.

The GenTouch s media player can handle video files up to 720p (which would have to be downscaled for the WVGA display) and supports e-books in text, PDF, ePub, and HTML formats. Even better, the GenTouch product page claims that you ll be able to download apps from the Android Marketplace onto the tablet - although I d like to see this in person, given that Google has supposedly restricted Android Marketplace access on "non-smartphones" like Archos s Android tablet.

The GenTouch78 will join such existing Android tablets as the $550 (or $299 with a two-year AT&T contract) Dell Streak, which comes with a GSM radio for voice calls (making it either a big smartphone or a smallish tablet, take your pick) and a speedy 1GHz Snapdragon processor, and Archos s 8GB, $200 Home 7 Tablet, which runs an older version of Android - 1.6, to be exact - and runs on a middle-of-the-road 600MHz ARM 9 processor. We re also expecting more Android tablets from Dell, Samsung, and perhaps even Motorola in the coming months.

An Android 2.1 tablet powered by a 1GHz processor sounds like a pretty good deal for just $150, but buyer beware; I haven t seen the GenTouch in person yet, nor have I spotted any reviews, so make sure to give it a test drive before impulsively snatching it up at your local K-Mart.

So, what do you think: Does the GenTouch 78 sound like the Android tablet bargain you ve been looking for? Waiting for a bigger Android tablet from a name brand?

Ballmer: Tablet Coming 'As Soon As We Can'

Microsoft will compete with Apple's iPad, but it isn't saying when.

Microsoft Corp. CEO Steve Ballmer says the company is working with Intel Corp. and computer makers to perfect tablet touch-screen computers.

Analysts attending an annual meeting at Microsoft headquarters on Thursday got few concrete details. Ballmer did say Windows tablets will use Intel processors for the foreseeable future.

Ballmer said, "We'll be in market as soon as we can."

But he added that whether it's "really, really soon, or just really, pretty soon, I'm going to wait until I have a device I want to hand you and tell you to go use."

Ballmer says Apple Inc. has "done an interesting job" with the iPad, and says Apple has sold more of the devices than he would like.

Goodbye Mouse: Apple's 'Magic Trackpad' Goes on Sale

Apple on Tuesday unveiled the "Magic Trackpad," a touchpad which allows a

user to operate a desktop computer with finger gestures, eliminating the need for a mouse.

The Magic Trackpad costs 69 dollars in the online Apple Store.

The battery-powered device, which looks a bit like a notepad made out of glass and aluminium, connects to Apple's Mac desktop computers using Bluetooth wireless technology.

It allows users to operate their machines using the tapping, swiping and pinching finger gestures well known to owners of iPhones or iPads.

Apple said it works from as far as 33 feet (10 meters) away from the computer.

The touchpad technology has already featured in Apple's MacBook Pro notebook computers.

Apple on Tuesday also unveiled new iMac desktop computers featuring more powerful processors, 21.5-inch and 27-inch screens and price tags of 1,199 dollars to 1,999 dollars.

Safari 5.0.1 Released with Extensions Gallery, Bug Fixes

On the heels of an iMac refresh, Apple on Wednesday released the next version of its web browser. As promised, Safari 5.0.1 comes complete with extensions and a Safari Extensions Gallery. In June, Apple rolled out extensions support to help developers create extensions using HTML5, CSS3 and JavaScript. The result is a growing gallery currently at 100 extensions.

The gallery lets Apple fans find extensions that add new features to the browser, such as toolbars that display live web feeds and sophisticated programs that filter web content. Safari 5.0.1 users can download and install extensions from the gallery or directly from a developer's web site.

"The Safari Extensions Gallery puts Safari right up there with Chrome or Firefox with its ability to add functionality to the browser," said Michael Gartenberg, a partner at Altimeter Group. "It looks like they've got a good collection of extensions already up in the gallery. What's interesting is that once again there is a Bing extension built in. Other than the extensions, this is a minor release."

Apple is getting kudos from some of its heavy-hitting technology colleagues (and competitors), including Microsoft, Twitter and Amazon.com. Gianna Puerini, vice president of worldwide design and community at Amazon, pointed to how the browser helps its customers build wish lists.

"With Safari 5, we were able to quickly build the Add to Amazon Wish List extension that lets customers add items from any web site to their Amazon wish list with the click of a button," Puerini said.

Jeff Henshaw, general manager of Microsoft's Bing User Experience, said the software giant is excited about working closely with Apple to bring "visually compelling Bing experiences to Safari."

"The Bing Extension for Safari brings Bing search intelligence to everyday browsing with Safari," Henshaw said. "When a user selects text in Safari, Bing instantly recognizes what they might need and pops up helpful, informative tips, from real-time maps and driving directions to real-time translations to direct web search results."

Jason Goldman, vice president of product at Twitter, said creating the Twitter extension in Safari was easy. "By providing features like the ability to tweet about a page and view trending topics," he said, "we've created a simple way to deliver relevant, interesting content to people regardless of where they are on the web."

In other Safari news, Apple patched some holes in the web browser less than a day before the Black Hat security conference kicks off. In all, Apple patched 15 vulnerabilities, including a flaw in how Safari auto-populates forms with a user's information. Jeremiah Grossman, CTO of WhiteHat Security, made that bug public on July 21.

Microsoft's IE9 Beta Arrives in September

Addressing an audience at the company's annual Financial Analyst Meeting in Redmond, Microsoft's COO, Kevin Turner, announced that a beta for Internet Explorer 9, the latest version of its popular browser, will be available fore download this September.

"The most beautiful thing about our browser story is the message is getting out with IE8, the safest most secure browser in the marketplace," Turner said. "We're really excited about IE9 which will be beta and coming out in September."

Microsoft released its third platform preview of its new browser in June, after its second platform preview about six weeks earlier, in May.

Turner didn't reveal much in the way of features for the upcoming release, but noted that IE9 will focus on the HTML5 standard. Also key, as expected, are speed, security, and safety.

The executive added that he was hopeful for the future of the browser, still the dominate product in the space, despite marketshare gains from the likes of Firefox and Chrome. "[I]n May and June," Turner told the crowd, "we grew share in the browser space for the first time in a very long time. So, the momentum on that has turned and it's a whole new day."

Ask.com Augments Search Engine with People

Ask.com, the Internet search engine owned by IAC/InterActive Corp, is seeking some human help answering web surfers' questions.

The company has begun testing a new service that lets users of its search engine submit questions to other Ask.com visitors, tapping into the powerful social networking trends that are increasingly gaining popularity on the Web.

The new service represents a striking shift for the company, which like
most Internet search engines has long sought to distinguish itself based
on the brawn of its computer algorithms.

But with only 3.6 percent share of the U.S. search market in June
according to analytics firm comScore, Ask.com is looking for ways to
differentiate itself from rivals Google Inc, Yahoo Inc and Microsoft Corp.

Google had a 62.6 percent share of the U.S. search market in June, while
Yahoo and Microsoft had market shares of 18.9 percent and 12.7 percent
respectively.

The new "Ask the Community" feature means the company will be able to
provide specific answers to a greater portion of the search queries it
receives, instead of simply displaying links to relevant web pages,
explained Doug Leeds, President of Ask.com U.S., while demonstrating the
new service to Reuters last week.

The service routs questions to other Ask.com users with expertise on
various subjects and is particularly useful for subjective search
queries which Leeds said can stymie traditional, algorithm-based search
engines.

Currently available by invitation only, Ask.com's service follows the
roll-out of similar social search and question-and-answer services like
Quora, a Palo Alto, California start-up founded by former Facebook
executives.

In February, search giant Google acquired Aardvark, which also offers a
social search service, for an undisclosed sum.

But Ask.com is the first major search engine to integrate an online
question-and-answer service directly into its flagship search product.

Leeds acknowledged that the new question-and-answer service might not
provide the same immediate money-making opportunity as traditional,
computer-generated Web searches, in which Ask.com sells special
search-based advertisements alongside search results.

But he said he expected that the new service will increase overall
searching on Ask.com, as people turn to its traditional search engine to
find more information about products and other items that are
recommended by people through the Q&A service.

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